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ABSTRACT

Parents experience parenthood as a state of personal growth, and share common concerns about their children and the parenting experience, according to a study of 30 middle class couples in a midwestern university community. Some of the common themes noted in group conversations about the subjective experience of parenthood include the recognition of the individuality of children; the valuing of interpersonal relationships; parents' feelings of having invested something of themselves in their children; concern for personal and social values; increased self-awareness; feelings of love and tenderness; insight; empathy; the growth of patience and tolerance; increased value of the use of reason; and worry about the power of outside forces. Some differences were found in the importance parents placed on certain of these themes according to the age of their children and the age and sex of parents. Parents of younger children stressed "positive affect and trust," qualities of experience that parents apparently discover in the early childhood years. These parents also expressed significantly more self-concerns, including anxieties about time and privacy, self-control, and energy and endurance. On the other hand, parents of young adult children expressed more ideas of empathy, or questioning of the self, and respect for the child's autonomy, as well as concern for the power of outside forces. The study suggests that parenthood is a dynamic process marked by periods of stress mingled with changing satisfactions and frustrations which parents believe contribute to their personal growth. Implications drawn from the study suggest that parent education serves to reinforce parents' self-competence and sense of self-esteem. (KC)

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THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTHOOD, FAMILY PHASE AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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The poet Adrienne Rich (1) in her journal described the experience of parenthood in this way:

> "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alienation between bitter resentment and raw edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness...There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another...and yet at other times I am melted with the sense of their helpless, charming and quite irresistible beauty, their ability to go on loving and trusting, their staunchness, and decency and unselfconsciousness...."

In her portrayal of the emotional intensity of the parenthood experience, the poet has in a unique way touched upon what may be a universal experience. What is the effect of the childrearing experience upon parents' feelings? How do parents perceive themselves in relation to their role as parent? How do adults feel that the process of childrearing contributes to their personal growth and development?

These questions were prompted by several considerations: (1) the growing recognition that individual and family development are intertwined in dynamic and mutually influential ways (2); (2) the ambivalent status of children in contemporary United States (3); and (3) the negative status of parenthood (4) as shown in the current trend toward childlessness and the cited advantages thereof.

A springboard for the present study was Erikson's belief (5) that "A family brings up a baby by being brought up by him" and in his concept of generativity. The "adult virtues" of care, insight, and responsibility develop in accord with the need to nurture that which one has generated (6). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (7) proposition that "if one member of a dyad undergoes development, the other is likely to do so," reflects the mutuality of parent and child development and represents an ecological orientation to understanding development.

Previous attention to subjective aspects of parenthood was cited by Hoffman and Manis (8) who, in their examination of the effects of children upon parental satisfactions and dissatisfactions across phases of the family, reported that parents of preschool children experienced more joys as well as frustrations. During the early years, parents were concerned about the negative effects upon themselves, while parents of older children tended to view the disadvantages in terms of concerns about their children. Mothers of young children reported more positive and negative changes attributed to parenthood, and mothers of teenagers tended to give more all positive responses. In contrast to these findings, Glenn and McLanahan (9), in their analysis of National Opinion Research Center data, reported that having children has little impact on global happiness of adults; this finding causes one to question the assumption that children are a source of happiness in middle years.

This study gave parents the opportunity to discuss at length both the positive and negative aspects of childrearing from their own perspective. Thirty mothers and thirty fathers, with ten families in each of three phases of the family, volunteered as subjects. As parents of present or former children attending the Child Development Laboratory Nursery School at the University of Illinois, they represented a middle-class university community. The three phases were defined by the ages of the oldest child:parents of preschoolers, middle school, and post-high school children. There were at least two children in each family and no families with severely ill or disturbed children.

In a structured but open-ended interview, parents were asked how the childrearing experience had changed their expectations for their children, their feelings about themselves, and sources of strength, satisfaction, stress,

and frustration. Content of responses was analyzed, and recurring ideas or themes were identified and coded.

How did parents describe the subjective experience of parenthood?

The most commonly expressed themes are defined and presented below in decreasing order of their frequency, with quoted material to illustrate each.

1. The Individuality of children, the need to come to terms with their individual differences, was the most frequent response to the question of how parental expectations for children had changed.

> "I had to realize that they are not what we mold them to be, but they are, basically, themselves...Each was born with a core personality that gets filled out but remains true to itself..."

2. Valuing Interpersonal Relationships expressed concerns for interpersonal quality, communication, true friendship, and family companionship:

> "The personal enjoyment, the joy in talking with the kids, in doing things together..."

3. Parental Investment included parents' feelings of having invested something of themselves in their children, with satisfaction or pride in the results, and sometimes an indication of one's immortality manifested in children:

> "Parenthood gives a sense of time and place within time; you realize there's a next generation...I have become more willing to invest my energies in another person...I have always valued life, but this is even more true now. So much effort, time, and life goes into raising a human being; I cannot imagine how it would be to take one's own life...You see your ideas, the seed you planted, bearing fruit in unexpected ways..."

(The term Parental Investment was borrowed from biological interpretations of behavior, notably Dawkins' The Selfish Gene (10).)

4. Value statements included concerns for social and personal values:

"I've taken a stronger stand in political and educational values because of the kids."

"Your values are both challenged and confirmed. You feel the affirmation of what you are."

5. Self Awareness was composed of self-examination and reflection, without self-condemnation:

"Each child took half my mind and all of my body. I had to make psychic space for myself."

6. Positive Affect referred to feelings of love, tenderness:

"The physical joy in being close to them, the laughter and fun!"

7. Insight represented feelings of growth in wisdom, judgment, and changed perspective:

"The process has made us more reflective...I discovered children are human beings if you treat them like human beings."

8. A cluster of ideas centered around Self Concerns: Self Criticism or condemnation, and anxiety over Self Control, loss of personal autonomy, and level of energy and physical endurance. A related set of ideas concerned Time: Time and Privacy for Self, and Time for Job or Career. These ideas were expressed in these ways:

"I feel frustrated in not being able to control my anger; it frightens me...I wish I had coped better...I feel guilty in not spending more time...I'm wondering how can I hold out?... the loss of spontaneity, the loss of sleep, the constant demands, the conflicting demands...working around the needs of the kids, bringing my work home so I can be here...wondering where I'm going to get the strength to cope with it all?...."

9. Empathy implied the increasing ability to see from the child's perspective, to feel with, as in...

"You open your eyes to see things the way they do, to be sensitive to what's important to them at the time."

10. Patience indicated the growth of patience of tolerance in the self:

"I've become more tolerant of noise, messes, and disruption."

This was the most popular "personal strength" parents reported.

11. Use of Reason and valuing of reason as a mode of interaction was heard in statements as

> "The older he gets, the more I can reason with him and the more interesting it is to be with him."

Parents also felt that the process of childrearing should be reasonable and logical; they expressed surprise that it was not as they had anticipated.

12. The Power of Outside Forces referred to a feeling of parental powerlessness compared to social forces, school, and children's peers.

> "They're exposed to so much, the sordidness of life in middle school, you feel so helpless in trying to help, in trying to understand what they're going through...we couldn't do anything about the schools, so we moved to another district..."

Other ideas expressed less frequently included the growth of Trust in one's feelings, experience, and judgment. Realism included the modification of unrealistic or idealistic notions:

> "Reality tempers the first expectations one has for one's children."

Ideas expressed by older parents included expressions that valued the Internal Qualities of the Child such as inward happiness and psychic well-being...

> "I hope that they are caring people who do not emotionally injure others," and Questioning of the self: "I began to question the nature of cause and effect, and my role in the process."

Still other kinds of responses were concerned with the economics of raising children--concern for social, political, and sexual attitudes, religious change, family role strains, and concern for their children's behavior, development, accomplishment, and achievement.

How did parental ideas vary among mothers and fathers and across the phases of the family?

Sex Differences

Mothers expressed significantly more ideas of Self Awareness, indicating greater self-examination and reflection in all three phases of the family. Earlier observations (11) have suggested that mothers tend to suffer from lowered self-esteem. The high degree of self-awareness, as compared to fathers, suggests that parenthood has a greater impact upon women. Mothers also expressed more ideas of Trust:

> ..."to know that you'll make it through the night with a sick child, to trust that what your're doing and feeling is o.k."... and of Realism: "It's time the mass media stopped lying to us so we can overcome these unreal images that influence us..."

These themes reflect the emotional impact of childrearing upon mothers.

Fathers and mothers differed in their valuing of Reason; fathers couldn't wait for their preschoolers to attain the "age of reason," seemingly devaluing early childhood logic, while mothers tended to call upon reason as children grew older.

Age and Family-Phase Differences

Since age of parent was highly correlated with family phase, it was interesting to examine which themes seemed to be a function of parents' age and which were more related to children's age. Parents of younger children expressed significantly more themes of Positive Affect and Trust, qualities of experience that parents apparently discover in the early childhood years. These parents also expressed significantly more Self Concerns, including anxieties about time and privacy, self-control, and energy and endurance. On the other hand, parents of young adult children expressed more ideas of Empathy, of Questioning of the self, and respect for the Child's Autonomy, as

well as concerns for the Power of Outside Forces.

Age of parent, distinguished from phase of family, was positively correlated with Valuing Interpersonal Relationships, Internal Qualities of the Child, and Realism; these qualities may reflect what could be called a reassessment of what is important and true during the middle years. The Power of Outside Forces and Questioning were also related to age of parent. It is evident that parents of older children expressed fewer personal anxieties and more about the world their grown children were entering. The emphasis upon empathy and "internal qualities" perhaps reflects changed ways of viewing one's children growing into adulthood.

What Does It Mean?

The study suggests that parenthood is a dynamic process that begins in earlier generations, that it is marked by periods of stress mingled with changing satisfactions and frustrations. Parents believe that parenthood contributes to their insight, self-awareness, patience, trust, empathy and other aspects of personal growth. Parenthood brings into focus personal, interpersonal, and societal values. It provides a focus for the investment of energy, time, and economic resources, as well as the investment of the self and the transmission of values. For some, parenthood represents an extension of the self and a symbol for one's immortality.

All parents attested to parenthood as a source of satisfaction and personal growth, but varied in how they described these. Mothers and fathers described the experience in subjectively different ways, though the parents in this study reported that they strove for equality in childrearing responsibilities.

These kinds of differences in parental experience need to be recognized by parent educators. For example, the fact that young fathers

waited for their child to attain the "age of reason" suggests that many young fathers could be helped to understand and appreciate the interesting cognitive and social changes taking place in their infants.

Aside from the information and insight provided by these interviews, parents seemed to enjoy participating. Beyond enjoyment, however, the process of evaluating their experience from their point of view was an opportunity to sort out important feelings and to communicate them.

Listening to parents and recording their spontaneously expressed ideas made it clear that parenthood is an emotional experience, and that many of the kinds of self-development described by parents are emotional development. The strengths, stresses, and changed perceptions represent changing notions of the self in relation to others; these are processes of feeling. It was also evident that the parents who were interviewed take their parental responsibility very seriously and conscientiously. Self-condemnation, guilt, and doubt about their ability to mediate the often conflicting demands of the self, family, and the outside world were frequent themes. It was evident, too, that parents varied in their quality of response to the changing challenge of parenthood; they varied in how they perceived their children and themselves, in their ability to empathize, to reflect on their experience, to adapt to the changing needs of their children, and to integrate the role of parenthood with other role demands.

The power of outside forces theme that was so prominent among older parents represents what Keniston referred to as "dethronement," reflecting much responsibility and relatively low status (4).

Dissatisfaction was expressed with society's messages about parenthood. In the words of one mother,

> "The biggest frustration is that parenthood is not considered an acceptable occupation by society; it is not a high priority item."

The feelings expressed by parents give support to the belief of home economists that education for parenting and parenthood is a felt need among adults who are normally and successfully functioning adults. Both mothers and fathers expressed the idea that their education had not prepared them for the complexities of childrearing and, as cited above, the mass media were criticized for portraying an unrealistic picture. Yet, perhaps the need for parent education goes beyond the need for information imparted in traditional ways.

Discussion, comparison, and articulation of sources of joy and frustration are opportunities for emotional growth. Pickarts and Fargo (12), in advocating education for parent competence and confidence, believe that parent education involves an attempt to discover the mind and feeling of the parenting ones. Enabling parents to be competent means helping their self-esteem and their sense of confidence in being able to meet their children's needs as well as their own need for self-worth within the family and in relation to the larger society. It means helping parents to recognize the mutuality of their children's development with their own.

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